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Opinion

Parlez-vous? Non

It is difficult to remember 15 years later the excitement and sense of accomplishment that accompanied the 1990 reform of Kentucky's public schools system, crafted with bi-partisan support by the General Assembly and the Wallace Wilkinson administration.

We were reminded of that last week when the State Department of Education – the *reformed* State Department of Education – backed away from a proposal that would have required that students have the ability to speak and write a foreign language when they complete high school.

By our reckoning, the proposal survived about two months.

Why delay what everyone agrees is a very good idea until 2016 at the earliest?

Not enough language teachers to go around.

But if Kentucky students aren't learning foreign languages in school because there aren't teachers, few of them will discover a talent for learning languages that will lead them to major in languages in college and eventually into Kentucky classrooms as teachers of Spanish, French, German, perhaps even Japanese, Chinese and once again Latin.

If there are too few language teachers in 2005, there is no reason to believe there will be enough in 2016 – or 2026 either. That's especially true as more states begin requiring foreign language study in their public schools and hire what language teachers are available.

It has become a cliché that we live today in a global village, but it is no less true. One of Kentucky's major industries is headquartered in Japan. Spanish-speaking workers perform more and more of Kentucky's agricultural jobs. There is non-stop jet service between Northern Kentucky and the major capitals of Europe.

Yet only a comparative few Kentucky students have the opportunity to learn the languages of those nations before they enter college. Now it seems it will be a decade at least before Kentucky students will have to learn foreign languages as part of the school curriculum.

Fifteen years ago, the men and women who crafted the reform of Kentucky schools would have found a way to bring language teachers into Kentucky classrooms. They would not have simply turned the clock ahead by a decade.